



Zaire (formerly known as the Congo) covers a large portion of Central Africa, and hair was worn in a wide variety of styles in this area.

In the Bapoto region the women were concerned primarily with styling the hair of their menfolk into cone and mitre shapes (the men usually had to lie down during this process).

Bambala women had two methods of dressing their hair: one involved shaving the

front part of the head and blackening it with soot, while the hair on the back of the head was plaited into tresses and painted with a mixture of soot and palm oil; the other method was to arrange the hair in longitudinal ridges and to dye it with the aid of red ferruginous clay.

Of all the Central African styles, perhaps the most startling were those of the Mangbetu women. A unique feature of the members of this ethnic group was the shape of their heads. Mangbetu mothers pressed the heads of their babies between pieces of giraffe hide or bark, which were tied tightly around the skull. As the head grew, the head bands were replaced. The result, after years of constant wrapping and re-wrapping, was an elongated, cone-shaped cranium, which was believed to increase the brain cavity and consequently to encourage greater intelligence.

Hairstyles were devised that accentuated the shape of the head. After much of the hair had been braided and wrapped around the forehead and lower part of the head a number of times, strands of hair growing from the crown were skilfully interwoven with straw to form a cylinder, which was secured to the scalp by hairpins made out of copper, wood, ivory or bone. The fine pottery and wood carving of the Mangbetu often feature this characteristic form of hair sculpture.

**24** *previous page and opposite*  
Red camwood boxes featuring stylized Mangbetu hairstyles.

**25** *above left*  
Woman from Mangbetu, Congo.